

COLTON HALL RECOLLECTIONS

BY THE REV. S. H. WILLEY, D. D., CHAPLAIN OF THE
CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION HELD THERE IN SEPTEMBER
1849.

Hon. Joseph R. Knowland
Oakland, California

Berkeley, Cal., May 31 1904

Dear Mr. Knowland:

Enclosed I send you some "recollections" of Colton Hall. I fear they will not be of much interest as your report of the Native Sons led them to anticipate, but they are such as come to my mind

You ask for the address of Hon. Francis J. Lippitt. I had a letter from him dated Bristol Ferry, Rhode Island, dated July 28, 1901, since which I have not heard from him. I think that he sometimes resides in Washington, D. C., but am not sure. I hope you will find him.

Yours very truly,
S. H. Willey

On landing in Monterey from the Pacific Mail Steamship, "California" on February 23, 1849, I found a thoroughly Mexican town in every respect. There was but one style of architecture after which all buildings were patterned. But there was one exception. On the side of the hill, a little back of town, stood a new, two-story stone building, that looked as if it might have dropped down from a New England village. There was no other building to be seen that resembled it, and I was not long in going to see what it was for. I found it entirely completed, all its rooms and passageways were finished. There were two large square rooms on the first floor, one great hall occupied all the space on the second floor.

There was nobody about the building. In the ^{upper} hall were some carpenters' tools, saws, planes, hammers, chisels, etc. and some bits of lumber scattered about as if the owners had left hastily, and this, I afterward learned, had been the case.

On the discovery of gold on the American River, carpenters were in as much haste as other people to get to the mines, and lost no time in caring for tools. So there they were, just as the owners had dropped them.

— In this condition Colton Hall stood during the summer, except that a school of some sixty boys and girls was gathered and taught in one of the lower rooms during that time.

Meanwhile, things were exceedingly quiet in Monterey, for men were in the mines, and only women and children were at home, save the officers of the government were there attending to their duties. These consisted largely in sending out horseback expresses and relieving them in return, preparatory to assembling of the first Constitutional Convention in California, which was called to meet in Colton Hall on the first of September, 1849.

The peculiar circumstances under which that convention was called, and the excellence and critical importance of the work done there have lent a dignity to the building itself, suggesting that it should be preserved.

It is undoubtedly the most suitable place for a convention in California at that time. It was built of white stone quarried from a neighboring hill.

The large hall in the second story was seventy feet long by thirty feet wide. It was reached by a wide stairway from the rear of the building. The front of the building was ornamented with a portico which you entered from the hall, and was supported by two lofty pillars.

When the time came for the meeting of the convention, carpenters were employed to put the hall in readiness for its use. Some three-fourths of the length of the hall was divided off by a rail for the exclusive use of the members, and the rest was left for spectators.

A raised platform was placed at the end of the hall for the president and tables in front of it for the secretaries and clerks. Chairs were placed on either side of a central space in front of the president to accommodate the forty-eight members.

The sessions of the convention opened on Monday, September 3rd, Robert Semple was chosen president and took his chair, and William G. Marcy was made secretary. The half dozen native Californians were assigned chairs near together, as their interpreter sat with them.

The other members took seats as it happened, for they were nearly all strangers to each other, meeting now for the first time. The seats first taken were usually retained through the sessions.

On the president's right, I remember, sat Francis J. Lippitt, Edward Gilbert, W.H. Gwin and others, and on his left H.W. Halleck, Lyron Norton T.O. Larkin. M.G. Vallejo, J.R. Snyder and others not now recalled.

For over one month that hall was the scene of most earnest and critically important work, and the results of it are seen in the history of the state and of the nation ever since.

THERE FOLLOWS THE DESCRIPTION OF COLTON HALL BY RAYARD TAYLOR, REPORTER OF THE NEW YORK TRIBUNE, SENT WEST BY HORACE GREELEY TO COVER THE GOLD RUSH STORY. TAYLOR'S EYE WITNESS ACCOUNT OF THE CONVENTION'S DURING AND AFTER THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION, AND DESCRIPTION OF COLTON HALL AT THE TIME, ARE TO BE FOUND IN HIS BOOK, "EL DORADO"